

# THE GRAVITY RAILROAD IN ARCHBALD.

A PAPER READ BY P. A. PHILBIN AT  
THE REUNION OF THE GRAVITY  
MEN'S ASSOCIATION IN SCRANTON,  
SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 4, 1915.

Mr. President, Ladies and Gentlemen:—

When my good friend, Mr. O'Connor, asked me to prepare a paper for this Gravity re-union, I was disposed to decline because I was at a loss to know what phase of its history to write about, so completely has the past of the Gravity system been revealed at former re-unions: but when there was added to Mr. O'Connor's gentle persuasiveness, the pressing energy of your honored President, Mr. Lorenz, there was no refusing; so the result of their exertions is the paper I have the honor to submit to-day.

It is not only on the score of friendship with your officers that I am privileged to be here, but I think I may also claim a sort of hereditary right because my grandfather was one of the builders of the Gravity extension to Archbald in 1846. The town of Archbald, in which I live, was named for the general superintendent of the system, James Archbald. Excepting Carbondale and Honesdale, it was the most important town on the system. The Gravity was so much a part of us and of our history; so many of our people used it and found employment on it and so long have I seen it in operation, that I may be qualified, by observation at least, to say something of the part it played in our development. I shall, therefore, confine myself to the Gravity chiefly as it relates to Archbald leaving for some other occasion the task of telling more fully its relation to the towns to the north and south of us.

## Beginning the Extension.

The extension of the Gravity railroad from Carbondale south was really responsible for the settlement of Archbald. In the Summer of 1845, the work of building was begun. The contract for the construction of the railroad from the Great Western mill in Jermy to Archbald was awarded to Patrick Kearney of Carbondale and Thomas McLoughlin of Scott. The

square timber used in the roadbed, to which the "ribbon" and strap-rail were fastened, was furnished by Thomas Meredith, a son of Samuel Meredith, a Revolutionary soldier and confidential friend of Washington. Meredith had a mill at Mayfield in which the timber was prepared and his son, Samuel, had actual charge of the contract. The Merediths, although men of considerable strength of character, were somewhat eccentric and the story goes that the son lost \$1500 on this contract. When upbraided by the father for his poor exhibition of business judgment, the son insisted that instead of losing \$1500, he had made a thousand dollars because he had lost a thousand less on this contract than his father had lost on a similar contract the preceding year. The fortune of the Merediths was lost in 1856 in a coal investment at Jessup that has since proved exceedingly profitable. It was this same Thomas Meredith who sought to have the charter of the Delaware & Hudson Company annulled by the legislature because it sold lumber to its workmen.

In the Spring of 1846, the old No. 1 mine at Archbald was opened and the coal from this mine was hoisted up two planes, known as No. 1 and No. 2, to the top of the mountain to the north of Archbald and the cars then went down the other side of the mountain of their own momentum, to the foot of Davis' plane in Carbondale. This mine opening was on the edge of White Oak creek about four hundred feet east of the Delaware & Hudson passenger railway. A single track ran from it to the foot of No. 1 plane, where the White Oak scale stood, while the head of the plane was opposite the Jordan residence on Hill street. The foot of No. 2 was about two hundred feet north of the head of No. 1 while the head of No. 2 was back of the Louis Otto home. The first engineer at No. 1 was Thomas Sayers, the first at No. 2 was George Simpson, later a prominent coal operator. The location of these old planes, which



were an important part of the Gravity system from 1846 to 1859, may be still traced amid the shrubbery under the ledge of rock to the east of Hill street.

#### The Old Planes.

The planes were built by Patrick Gilmartin, the first settler and a prominent citizen of Archbald in the early days, under the direction of engineer Gideon Frothingham. Not the least of the builder's troubles were the rattlesnakes with which the locality abounded. Nearly all the workmen were recently of the Emerald Isle and they had a particular abhorrence of "sarpints." The sight or sound of one would demoralize the force. On one occasion a blast fired in the early Spring uncovered a den of twenty-four rattlers hibernating under a dislodged rock. One of the workmen was bold enough to break them in pieces as he would so many twigs.

The line was finished in the Summer of 1846 and the first runners over it were Luke Williams, Jerry Sherry, Conrad Coon, Phil Franklin, Ike Madison, and Jonathan and Owen Jones. Later runners over the line in the 50's who are still living were Edward Craig, of Archbald and Patrick Boland of Scranton, who is still in active duty as tipstaff of the county court. Mr. Boland in 1859 ran the first trip of cars around the "buckhorn", as the curved stretch of track between planes C and D was called.

#### Archbald the Terminus.

Archbald was the southern terminus of the Gravity railroad from 1846 to 1859. All the freight received for and from the residents of the Lackawana valley as far south as Pittston was received at the depot, or storehouse, as it was commonly called, which stood about one hundred feet south of the Hill street crossing of the Delaware & Hudson railway. The first station-agent at this depot was John Spangenburg and his assistant was James Corcoran. Because of the large freight business even in that far off time, the depot, which was 60 by 100 feet in size, was frequently packed with goods. This was the case especially in the spring and fall when the merchants of the valley went to New York to do their buying. It took from two to three weeks for a shipment from New York to reach the valley. The freight was loaded on canal boats there and towed up the Hudson to Rondout, the eastern terminus of the canal, and thence to Honesdale. It is a fact not generally

known, that the T rails used in the building of the main line of the Erie railroad were shipped to their destination from Scranton's mills in Slocum Hollow by way of Archbald. These rails were taken to Archbald on long wagons, drawn by four-horse or four-mule teams and loaded on trucks at the foot of No. 1 plane and sent over the mountains to Honesdale and the canal.

#### The Erie Rails.

This shipment of rails, by the way, was the salvation of the Erie railroad. Although the T rail was an American invention there were so few made here that England was the chief source of supply and in the early 40's they were sold for \$80 a ton. The State of New York had assisted in building the Erie railroad and the Erie company could not pay the interest on the \$3,000,000 which it owed the State. The railroad was, therefore, advertised for sale under foreclosure by the State Comptroller but the sale was postponed by the legislature and the company was given until April 14, 1851 to complete the railway to Dunkirk, N. Y. At this juncture the Scrantons interested William E. Dodge in their mills and on their assurance that T rails could be manufactured for little more than half the price of the English product, Dodge advanced the money for the equipment of the Scranton mills. The twelve thousand tons he contracted for were sold for \$46 a ton and were ready for delivery in 1847. The promptness of the Scrantons in delivering these rails enabled the Erie company to complete the railroad within the required time.

#### The Old Coal Cars.

Professor White, in his excellent address last year, told you of the primitive construction of the old Gravity track, but, as I recall, said nothing of the cars. They were practically the same in the early days as they were when the road was abandoned in 1898, except that they were considerably smaller. They held between two and a half and three tons of coal. The coal was not prepared for market in different sizes as it is now and not only were the methods of mining and preparing very crude but the method of handling was also. Thus, when the Delaware & Hudson company began taking coal from what is known as the creek level in Archbald, the Gravity cars which came in to be loaded were dropped from one branch to another by means



of a strong hemp rope wound around a tree stump that stood close to the mouth of the mine. This stump did service as a sheave wheel for several years.

In the old days the car brake was simple in construction but somewhat uncertain in use. It was a swinging brake with a wooden shoe that pressed the top of two wheels of the car. Every fourth or fifth car in a train of thirty or forty cars was equipped with this brake. While it was in use the second runner--and there were usually three in a train--carried a leather strap over his shoulder to which were attached a number of blocks or "sprags". He also carried a "puddler", a notched piece of wood which was fastened on the front of the car between the topbeam and the brake-lever to keep the brake down. For years after this part of the Gravity line went into operation the runners were provided with a stout hemp rope with a hook on each end which was fastened to the car and the cable as the cars went up the Carbondale planes. The brake in use when the line was abandoned was the invention of James Nicol, for many years a resident of Archbald. It was a double brake with the shoe pressing the eight wheels of the car from the bottom.

In the early days, the first car of every trip had a front board which projected forward about five feet, and on this the foreman of the trip sat. It was his duty to throw the switches, to keep the track clear and to give warning of danger to the other runners. It was while doing his duty as foreman that Charles Hallock, one of the most popular of the early runners, was killed. The use of this board was abolished by C. P. Wurts.

#### First Passenger Trains.

Before 1859, no passenger trains were run on the Gravity system. It was used only for coal or other forms of freight. The Company was, however, very generous in permitting the use of its cars without profit and sometimes at considerable loss. It was not an uncommon thing for a party of boys or girls who wished to have a lark, to take one or more of the Gravity cars and start away without as much as asking leave. This was invariably done on the rare occasion of a picnic or a circus in Carbondale and there are instances on record of elopements having been effected by this same means. Later on, when the boys got careless about

returning the cars where they found them, and after accidents had happened, the Company stopped the practice.

In 1859 a passenger service was established. This consisted of one round trip daily between Carbondale and Providence. The train was made up of one passenger car and a car for freight, each about twenty-five feet long. The passenger was simply a freight car with four windows, two feet square, cut on each side and a door at each end. The seats were two long benches, one on each side of the car. A stove stood in one corner of the car. The interior finish of the passenger car was not elaborate but the car was comfortable and it was certainly a great convenience to the people, who, at that period, were coming into the valley in large numbers. In those days the Gravity line ended at the foot of plane G in Olyphant and the cars were then drawn by a locomotive to Providence. The journey to Scranton was made on foot or by stage-coach from Providence. The fare from Archbald to Carbondale was 50 cents the round trip and to Scranton one dollar, with less rates between intermediate points. The first passenger conductor on this line was Lew Decker. Other early passenger conductors were a Mr. Guire of New York, Alva Daley and Elliot Skeels. Mr. Skeels had charge of the first passenger train run on the steam road. After nearly sixty years of faithful service he was recently retired on a pension. The first freight conductor was John Brown of Carbondale. Another of the early freight conductors was Jud Callendar of Peckville.

In Archbald, from the late 50's to 1871 when the steam railroad went into operation, there were two depots, one at Salem street on the east side of the town and the other on the hill back of the Dickson store on the west side of the town. Both were tended by the late Adam V. Gerbig. It was his practice to do business at the east side station until the south bound train came from Carbondale and then to meet the north bound train at the west side station, where passengers only were taken on. This train had the right of way and each plane on the line was cleared of coal trains ten minutes before its arrival. Mr. Gerbig served as station agent for the Delaware & Hudson Company for nearly thirty years.

#### In the Civil War.

Over the Gravity line during the



Civil War, troops moved to and from the front. The line afforded the most convenient mode of traveling for the hundreds, many of them Gravity men, who responded to the call of their country during its four years of civil strife. Most of the moving of troops took place in the night, partly to avoid interference with the ordinary traffic of the road and partly to avoid the confusion that always attended the departure of troops. This service was attended to with the greatest care. Every foot of the road was patrolled while the troop trains were in motion for there were many Southern sympathizers in the valley and accidents were apprehended. But none ever happened. Over the telegraph line connected with the Gravity system, came the first news of the bombardment of Fort Sumter, the victories at Antietam and Gettysburg and finally, the sad announcement of Lincoln's assassination. This news reached the upper Lackawanna valley in the early morning of April 15, 1865, the day after the fatal attack on the president at Washington.

#### The Line to Olyphant.

The opening of the mines south of Archbald made necessary the extension of the Gravity system farther south and the building of a return line to Carbondale and Honesdale. This was undertaken in 1858. In that year work on planes A, B, C, D, E, F, and G, and the short canal leading to the foot of plane C was begun. The work was finished and the planes were in operation in 1859. All the stone work, such as bridge abutments, engine beds and the foundation for the water wheel at plane C, was done by Godshall & Kirlin of Scranton, the stone being supplied by Richard Sweeney. It is said that there was no responsible bidder for the entire extension of the line so the work was let in small contracts to local builders. Thus, planes A and B were built by Kearney and McLoughlin; the extension from the Delaware & Hudson mine at Archbald to the foot of plane C by Patrick Martin and William Gilgallon; plane C by Edward Carroll and his son, John, and plane D by James Gay. The track leading from plane C to plane D and from D back to plane B was laid by Daniel Moyles. The laborers employed on this work got 65 cents for a ten hour day and the stone cutters were considered well paid at \$1.25 per day. William H. Richmond of Carbondale, still living on Richmond

Hill, Scranton, was the contractor who supplied the first cars used on this division.

#### Old Plane Employees.

The canal that supplied power to plane C was the only one in use south of Carbondale. It was made by Patrick Gilmartin and Thomas Kenny. The inlet was at the foot of Salem street where White Oak creek joins the Lackawanna river. At this point the river was dammed and from this dam the canal was amply supplied with water. The first wheel tender was Edward Barber and it is an oft-told story that the fish were so plentiful in the canal that he frequently found it necessary to drive them away with a pole to give the water a chance to flow over the wheel. The water wheel was abandoned in 1865.

When plane A was placed in operation the first engineer was Alfred Sayers and the first footman was John Meyl. Sayers was succeeded by William Young, later of the Pennsylvania Coal Co., and Young was succeeded by John Samson. At plane B Dennis Blake was the first engineer and Richard Jordan the first footman. There were no footmen at the other planes. William Whittaker succeeded Blake and Thomas Scott succeeded Jordan. Whittaker was followed by Perry Parsons and Parsons by Halsey Lathrope. Lathrope, on his removal to plane E, was succeeded by Clarence A. Samson. William Muir was the first engineer at C and John Fallon the second, James H. White the third and then came John Stephens. Stephens was followed by John Pfoor. "Win" Foster enjoyed the unique distinction of serving as engineer at D from 1858 when the plane was built, until 1898, when it was abandoned.

During the forty years in which the southern division of the Gravity railroad was in operation there have been but three rope-riggers in charge. The first of these was Patrick Norton, who began work in 1859. James McGreal came here very soon after and while he was at the front in 1861, in response to President Lincoln's call for "three months" troops, Dennis Smith assisted Norton. After the war John Murphy entered the service and for many years Norton and Murphy were the only riggers on the division. McGreal and Murphy died about two years ago while Mr. Norton is still living in comfortable retirement, in Archbald.



#### End of the Gravity.

The Gravity was scheduled to pass out of existence on December 31, 1898 but as a matter of fact, cars were run over it several days after. It is worthy of note that the last trip of loaded cars was run over the head of plane A by your President, Mr. Lorenz, on January 3, 1899 and the last trip of "lights" was run over by Henry Simon, Jr., next day.

It is, perhaps, a high tribute to the efficiency of the employees of the Gravity system to state that nothing of great consequence happened on the line. Extraordinary things rarely happen when everybody is doing what he is expected to do. Of course, even the best regulated things sometimes go awry and so it has happened that an occasional wreck occurred. But the accidents were singularly free from loss of life. Considering the very hazardous nature of the employment it is surprising how few fatalities there were. One that is still spoken of with a note of sadness is the death of Chris Powderly, a brother of Hon. T. V. Powderly of Washington, which occurred at the head of plane A in 1862. Mr. Powderly was the head runner of a passenger train and was drawn under the cars while detaching a cable at the head of the plane. There were many hairbreadth escapes and many incidents, both grave and gay, to vary the monotony of work but, as Kipling

says, "that's another story". Of these alone I presume there are enough to make a large and readable volume and it is to be hoped that at some time in the near future an effort will be made to gather them for printing.

The custom of holding re-unions of this nature is one to be encouraged. It serves to make the Gravity an active agency of goodfellowship. It enables the old employees to keep in touch with one another and to renew bonds of friendship formed long ago and likely to grow in fervor as the years roll on. Gradually your membership is thinning. In a little while there will be few here of those we look upon to-day, for most of the old Gravity men are well past middle life. Some have already gone over the line dividing time from eternity; others are still actively engaged in varied pursuits. Of all of them it may be said that they were an earnest and efficient body of workers, who, as a present day philosopher says, "were blest because they found their work and did it" faithfully and well.

NOTE—This paper has been considerably amplified for printing in the Archbald Citizen. For much of the information it contains grateful acknowledgment is made by the writer to Mr. Daniel J. Gilmartin, Mr. James H. White and Mr. J. George Lorenz, all of Archbald.



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-- a paper read by P.A. Philbin at a  
reunion of Gravity Mens Association  
in Scranton, September 4, 1915

( the men were workers on the Gravity Railroads)